DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 196 780 SO 013 064

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TITLE Ethnic Minorities in America: Past, Present, Future.
PUB DATE Jul 76
NOTE 12p.: Paper presented at the Tamkang American Studies Conference (2nd, Taipei, Taiwan, July 13-14, 1976).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acculturation: American Indians; Blacks; Case Studies; Chinese Americans; Cultural Background; *Ethnic Groups; *Ethnic Status; Futures (of Society); Mexican Americans; *Minority Group Influences; *North American Culture; *Racial Bias; Social Integration; United States History

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the nature of ethnic prejudice and examines the treatment of four ethnic minorities in the United States--American Indians, blacks, Chinese Americans, and Mexican Americans. The hypothesis is that, despite inequality, ethnic minorities in the United States enjoy a better lot than ethnic minorities elsewhere. Two forms of prejudice against ethnic minorities are recognized--legal (involving qualification for citizenship and for jobs and educational opportunities) and personal (involving personal relations in neighborhood and community situations, for example). Several types of evidence are offered in support of the contention that ethnic minorities are relatively well off in the United States. These include general observation of historical events and contemporary society, literature reviews, analysis of census figures, citation of court decisions, and examination of activism among minority groups with regard to their civil rights. A brief overview of the discrimination/acculturation experiences of each of the four ethnic groups under study indicates that there are currently fewer ethnic biases and fewer obstacles to equality and full social participation in the United States than at any other time in history and that the United States compares well with other nations generally regarding treatment of ethnic minorities. Specific freedoms and privileges enjoyed by ethnic minorities in the United States, which are often not offered in other nations, include the right to practice their own religion, have their own customs, keep their own names, strive for a good education, and live in a relatively free class structure. The conclusion is that America has made great strides in wiping out flagrant legal and personal prejudice against ethnic minorities. (DB)

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ETHNIC MINORITIES IN AMERICA: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

Marion Therese Casey

Minority groups in countries around the world often do not fit comfortably into another nation's culture. The sizeable segment of Chinese in Asian countries not their own frequently has caused them to experience second class citizenship. Their experience is not unique. A recent article in a weekly began, "There has never been much love lost between the Koreans and the Japanese—no more say than between the Poles and the Germans." Koreans living in Japan experience prejudice; Poles living in Germany experience the same. In U.S. refugee camps in 1975 friction developed between Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees. In Latin America, Bolivia for example, the native Latin-American is discriminated against and the Spaniard, a relative newcomer gets the education, job, promotion and the profit. A few years ago I helped guide a group of visiting Russian college teachers around California. Most were from Moscow where it is a privilege to live, but a few happened to be from outlying provinces which prompted explanations as to the unusual circumstance of the outsiders' inclusion in the group. One Russian teacher informed me quietly, "They even let some Georgians come. We say you can always pick them out. They do things so differently from the rest of us." When teaching Korean university students about the injustice of confining Japanese-Americans to camps during World War II they strongly disagreed with me, arguing that the relocation camps were a necessity. It was had to find a Korean university student who was opposed to the use of the atom bomb against the Japanese. Such examples of ethnic reaction and interaction are commonplace, yet often not realized by Americans.

When we study the population of the United States, this vast

conglomerate of ethnic pluralism where all claim citizenship and sense a common loyalty it should create a certain wonder that all are accepted to the extent that they are, since we are not a homogeneous nation in precisely the same way as are most other nations. Succinctly, Herman Melville said it, "We are not a nation so much as a world." And as nations in the world quarrel and exist in a state of tension so do ethnic groups in the United States, despite world charters and a U.S. constitution which stresses the equality of all people. It would be unrealistic to imagine various types of people in the world existing in complete tranquility. Neither can one expect this to happen in the United States, even though our glowing rhetoric often makes us think something is wrong if the ideal is not accomplished. The melting-pot rhetoric may be a carry-over from a time when there was a levening of the many Anglo-Saxon races which arrived about the same time. Differences were minimal. It does not apply to the otehr half of the American population who are distinctly different from the Northwestern European population. The United States is filled with ethnic tension, hopefully creative.

Where ethnic minorities reside, both in the United States and elsewhere, there are two kinds of prejudice. The first is legal prejudice, where inequality is practically written into the legal system, and the second is prejudice of a personal sort. Examples of the first are readily found in foreign countries. In many places ethnic minorities cannot become citizens; they are locked into the bottom of a tight caste system; they are excluded from universities unless they are from influential families, or can bribe their way in (or out); they often enjoy no franchise; they frequently qualify for only menial jobs. In contrast, despite obvious deprivations of some minorities in America, one has to admit that there has been a gradual uphill struggle for legal equality in the United States. Fortunately, the legal fight has been successful to a great extent. For some, the dropping of legal barriers has been painfully slow. For example, the American Indian did not become a citizen until 1924, nor could Blacks serve in integrated army units until World War II. But there has been legal progress. The situation has even resulted in cases of "reverse bias" or "reverse discrimination" being brought by qualified non-minority individuals who feel that less quali-

fied minority individuals were favored in education or business. The story about a Chicagoan may be apocryphal but it is reported that a capable woman called a newspaper office to apply for an advertised position and was told, "Sorry, no openings. We are hiring only Latinos and Blacks at present." That particular answer may never have been articulated in so many words, but people have been suing, with results, that such discrimination actually worked against them.

The second type of bias, personal prejudice is harder to lessen. No law can force a neighbor to treat another neighbor with civility, but because the country has confronted the legal issue directly, the United States has probably progressed further than other nations where is still strong legal discrimination. As persons become educated together, enter professions together, talk to each other, personal prejudices are often, though certainly not always, lessened. The importance of law is seen as stating that an official policy outlawing discrimination exists, however impossible it is to regulate peoples' feelings. My thesis in this paper is that despite inequality minorities in the United States enjoy a better lot than ethnic minorities elsewhere, admitting at the same time that cultural pluralism will always create a certain tension. Of the many ethnic groups I will speak about four—Native Americans who were systematically cheated of their rights and almost exterminated; Black Americans who were removed by force from their homes to labor in inhuman conditions; Chinese who were unwelcome because of an unfamiliar appearance and suspect habits; Mexican-Americans who have been exploited and treated as though they were not legal citizens.

Native Americans for a long period were not recognized as contributors to American culture. Until the 1930's when John Collier became Commissioner of Indian Affairs and sponsored a New Deal for the American Indian there was little recognition or appreciation of Indian contributions even in such obvious areas as art or dance. From the beginning our policy was tragic toward a group that more often than not only resorted to violence when attacked. In the last thirty years, and particularly in the last decade the plight of the Indian has been made more prominent. Where revisionist history has not yet taken hold the old stereotype of the Indian as the "bad guy" sometimes surfaces in movies, television and literature, but today this is rare, and

quickly recognized as an outdated stereotypic portrayal. Even General Philip Sheridan who once was praised for saying "The only good Indians I ever saw were dead," has lost that praise.

A North American estimate for the beginning of the 16th century places the number of Indians at over a million with a high population concentration on the east coast. Until the 1830's the newcomers pushed the Indians off whatever land they wanted in the absence of an organized policy. When the official policy came, it supported the practice and worked against the Indian. The first coherent system evolved in Andrew Jackson's administration with his approval and attempted to place all Indians west of the Mississippi River. Even a civilized tribe such as the Cherokee tribe was forced to move despite the objection of someone as powerful as Chief Justice John Marshall. Jackson defied Marshall and the so-called "trail of tears" began.

Once the Indians were settled on the Great Plains, pioneers decided the "Great American Desert" was arable after all, and they would like to farm, graze their animals, and mine there. Again it was the Indians who were forced to move. A chief whose family had been moved five times told a commissioner "I think you had better put the Indians on wheels and you can run them about whenever you wish." The advent of the railroad further depreseed the Indians because this meant the end of wide spaces of land, and the slaughter of buffalo, the Indians' source of food, clothing, shelter and fuel. Broken treaties were common, the "promise to take land being the only one which was kept", according to one Indian.

In the late 19th century a series of Indian wars broke out culminating in the battle of Wounded Knee, a battle revived and made famous in Dee Brown's 1970 best seller. These disastrous confrontations formerly referred to as brilliant victories in texts reduced the number of Indians to about 250,000 or about one-quarter of their original number. (The 1972 census places the number of Indians at 800,000, which makes them one of the fastest growing minorities today.) Each of the "wars" between 1860 and 1890 usually ended in defeat for the tribes which were powerless before edvanced technology and weakened by the diseases and "firewater" of the settlers. Even after surrendering, Indians were massacred, as when hundreds

were slain after surrendering to Colonel J. M. Chivington in 1864.

The voices were few which spoke against the official policy of the U.S. government. Helen Hunt Jackson published *A Century of Dishonor* in 1881 at her own expense and distributed copies to members of Congresss. Alfred B. Meacham, whom Carl Schurz called the most faithful friend the Indians had, edited an Indian rights publication, *Council Fire*. But these two were exceptions. The common sentiment was more often expressed in boasts of military victory against the savages who were hindering progress. Theodore Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West* is a leading example. It was not until the years of the F.D.R. administration that a movement began to do something for the Indian. Government policy since then has attempted to improve the lot of the Indian, particularly in aiding schools. The high school drop out rate is estimated at over 50%. The unemployment rate is often as high as 40%. Life expectancy is lower than for other Americans. Living conditions on reservations are often sub-standard.

At present the so-called "Red Power" movement has attracted sympathy from movie heroes and prominent personalities but it has not attracted support from the rank and file of the American people. Revisionist treatments have made people aware of injustices of the past but most remain apathetic. More significantly, the Indian himself or herself is often torn by a desire to break away and look for economic benefits in a hostile environment off the reservation, and to remain at home preserving familiar native culture. Those Indians who move into the mainstream (whatever that is) of American soceity and enter into universities, business, marriage, and every other type of institution can become assimilated if this is their wish. Having an Indian in one's family background is rarely hidden, but considered a source of pride. Hopefully those who do leave the reservation atmosphere will cherish their ethnic heritage, and perhaps with acquired skills will move back to a reservation area to improve conditions. I think in the next twenty-five years an improved Native American situation will come as a rsesult of those of Indian descent willing to help their own people.

The situation of Black Americans is probably the most widely publicized of all minority plights. The improvement of that situation mainly has been due to educated, aware Blacks who have led the move-

ment since World War II. Blacks are particularly sensitive to a society which, as Black educator Dr. Geneva Gay declared "is and always has been a racist society." From 1619 onward when Blacks were first brought to America against their will, the struggle has been waged for full recognition. Racism, states Dr. Gay, "is deeply woven into the entire ideological foundations of American life and is perpetuated by all the institutions of society."[1] Some consider her statement an extreme position but for Blacks until 1954 when the Supreme Court decided the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas case the institutions of society with rare exceptions were firmly closed to Blacks. Even when the United States constitution was written in 1787 Blacks were almost 20% of the U.S. population, yet there is no condemnation of slavery mentioned in the document. Ante-bellum slavery deprived human beings of their God-given human rights, and even after the Civil War "black codes" and Supreme Court decisions kept Blacks in a state of servitude not unlike their previous experience. Notable was the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision which sanctioned the "separate but equal" concept segregating Blacks principally in education and transportation. In the 20th century this legal discrimination was fought against by black groups such as the Niagara movement group (1905), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1909), the Urban League (1911), the Marcus Garvey Movement (1920's), A. Philip Randolph's movement orgainizing a labor union for Blacks (1920's-1930's) but it was not until after World War II that the movement for equality began in full force and produced notable success. Led mainly by well educated NAACP lawyers, groups fought to end legal segregation, a fight which culminated in the landmark Brown decision in 1954. Under the guidance of religious leaders, Martin Luther King being the most prominent, and expert lawyers, the movement gained momentum. Many civil rights acts counteracting legal discrimination were passed. Today, Blacks enjoy a legal equality unknown forty years ago, yet the personal prejudice against balcks remains in may areas. Blacks, as well as other minority groups, have not fused together in the crucible Israel Zangwill described in his 1908 play, *The Melting Pot*. With the rediscovery of the value of ethnicity, the goal of a melting pot homogeneity may be outdated. Blacks probably are the group most desiring cultural

pluralism.

The future for Black American is difficult to predict. Legal prejudice, thanks principally to their own efforts will have been essentially eliminated. It is impossible to predict when the area of personal prejudice will normalize. Hopefully, it will not take the tragedy of a world war to bring the races to an appreciation of their common interests. One of the areas where reform seems most promising is in the area of text book revision, curricula revision, and teacher training. Since in the important area of the family, unfortunately, racial prejudices are often fostered, a corrective program in the schools is needed. Racism must be exposed by teachers sympathetic with this point of view. She or he should be acutely aware of the bias agaist blacks brought from a home environment, found in books or viewed on television. Since prejudices as well as values are most often "caught, not taught" it is essential that the student catch the attitude of an enlightened teacher in this regard. The material may not make an impression, but the teacher will.

The first Asians (unless we count the trek people probably made over the Bering Strait centuries ago, to form the main stock of the Native American population) to come to the United States were the Chinese in the 19th century. Other Asians followed—Filipinos after the Spanish-American War; Japanese at the beginning of the 20th century; Koreans beginning in the 1950's; Vietnamese in the 1970's. Though all were very different people in language and culture, they often met the same kind of discrimination. Historians would like to view the Chinese newcomers through their own eyes but very few left recorded material. There is even a lack of scholarly sources by contemporary oriental scholars. Chinese scholars have done more research in the area than other Eastern scholars and perhaps Kwang-Ching Liu's remark expresses the veiw of many of the orientals who came. He wrote, with the bias typical of all ethnic groups,". . . the Chinese were on the whole the most unfairly treated group of newcomers."[2]

The Chinese came to the United States as railroad workers, miners, farmers, laundry operators, fruit pickers and canners. To the Chinese government the insignificant few who departed from the Canton area were not missed, but onto a relatively sparce, empty American west

coast they seemed to swarm, and early became feared as the "yellow peril." As builders of the Central Pacific railroad they performed arduous labor, which prompted railroad magnate Charles Crocker to admit, "Wherever we put them we found them good, and they worked themselves into our favor to such an extent that if we found we were in a hurry for a job of work, it was better to put Chinese on at once. . ." Though their work was more than satisfactory the photographs of the famous "golden-spike" scene were touched up so only the Irish immigrant faces would show. The Irish were considered "low-class" and "foreign" at the time, but the decision must have been made to leave one ethnic minority group in. Otherwise generations afterward would have wondered who actually built the railroad!

Returning to California in the 1870's after the construction of the track, the Chinese suffered from the hostility of their neighbors. With money they had earned thousands returned to their families in China. Others remained, enduring painful discrimination, especially during economic hard times, when Chinese newcomers were blamed for working for very low pay. Job competition was keen in California. American Federation of Labor leader Samuel Gompers was a life-long opponent of cheap Chinese labor which challenged union labor. Prevailing sentiment was expressed by an Irish immigrant in 1877, "We declare that the Chinaman must leave our shores. We declare that white men and women and boys and girls cannot compete with the simple Chinese coolie in the labor market. We declare that we cannot hope to drive the Chinaman away by working cheaper than he does." The newcomer seemed unassimilable—different in race, mysterious in religion (a "non-christian" heathen stereotype developed, unintentionally helped along by missionaries in China), unusual in dress, language and food. Chinese were accused of smuggling in opium, promoting prostitution and gambling, and shipping gold back to China. Legally, the justice system did not favor the new immigrant, so the Chinese organized their own benevolent societies. The ruling elite usually consited of merchants who dispensed jobs and settled disputes. This resulted in the Chinese successfully ruling themselves, but unfortunately a potentially valuable constituency was written off by politicians. The Chinese developed far more self government than did any other ethnic com-

munity. The world outside these walls seemed hostile. Some states had laws against intermarriage so that the immigrants who came (and the first influx brought mostly men) rarely found spouses in the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 which banned Chinese laborers was the first to outlaw any immigrant group to American shores. The famous newspaper editor, Horace Greeley expressed the fear of many when he wrote that "a rivulet of Chinese would increase to a Niagara flooding the nation" if an exclusion act did not close the doors.

By the late 1930's and 1940's the prejudice against Chinese seemed to have lessened. Younger people arrived for an education, often sponosred by missionaries, some with scholarships from money the United States had given to China after the Boxer Rebellion, some were the children of affluent merchants. During the war with Japan, Americans extended more sympathy to Chinese. Both before the war and after, educated Chinese-Ameicans quickly moved into prominent positions in medicine and education, as well as in other professions. The merchant class, which once guided the new immigrants enjoyed remarkable success. Today Chinese-Americans enjoy a high (some have said the highest) per-capita income as compared to other ethnic minorities. As cultural pluralism continues to be accepted the Chinese can now practice their culture and customs not only in the seclusion of their own homes as was first necessary, but in the open and with pride in the cultural heritage which is theirs. All legal barriers are down to Chinese, and they are accepted in the highest level positions, though personal prejudice still endures in some areas.

Mexican-Americans form the largest group (5 million) among numerous people of Spanish descent (9 million) in the United States. Three-fifths of these Mexican-Americans (Chicanos) live in the Southwest. They are the largest immigrant group entering the United States at the present time, unfortunately in the company of many illegal entrants. Of the approximately 800,000 illegal immigrants which the United States deports every year, 90% of these are Mexican.

Historically, Chicanos are the only minority in the United States which joined the country as a result of annexation. This followed the war with Mexico in 1846-1848. At that time when the United States

acquired a vast amount of Mexican territory, thousands of former Mexican citizens automatically came under United States jurisdiction. It is estimated that 80% lost their land claims as a result of this transfer and were forced to become tenant farmers or migrant workers. Because they spoke an alien tongue and followed what seemed like Indian customs, the settlers often treated them as Indians. It was difficult for the new Mexican-American population to adjust to a distant government when formerly each Mexican town had governed itself. A justice system brought in from the outside seemed foreign and frequently unjust especially when the judge was deciding a land claim between an "Anglo" and a person of Mexican descent. Banks in the Southwest charged unfair rates. The Chicanos never gained any political power in the areas where they lived. Some sought to escape to large cities in the North but often ended up in urban "barrios" where the conditions of living were as bad or worse than those in the rural areas. Mexican-Americans found only the most menial jobs open to them.

Chicanos themselves have agitated for discriminatory laws and practices to be discarded. In the San Joaquin Valley of California the grape boycott has directed nation-wide attention toward the plight of the farmers and grape pickers. In the schools Mexican-Americans have demanded better treatment for their children, where the drop-out rate for Chicano high-schoolers is sometimes 50%, and have asked for more teachers with knowledge of Spanish language and culture. Improved services are demanded in the "barrio" sections of large cities. However, the biggest threat to Mexican-Americans is the illegal presence of Mexican nationals who daily cross the border into the United States. This illegal migration over the lengthy 1600 mile border depresses wages and thereby creates unemployment for the bona fide Mexican-Americans themselves. If the Chicano citizen is to be helped, a much stricter policy along the Mexican-American border will have to be enforced, and stronger measures will have to be taken against those employers who contract with aliens for extremely low wages. Many of these are Mexican-Americans themselves.

It is my conclusion that though minority groups in the United States suffer discrimination in various degrees, and there have been serious violations of human rights, I think more people would rather be

an ethnic minority in America than any place else in the world. As a first choice, most people would choose their own country; as a second choice, and with full knowledge of the discrimination they would have to endure, I believe most migrants would prefer to land in Los Angeles, or New York, or Miami than any where else. Looking over the vast amount of material which documents the sufferings of Puerto Ricans in New York, Blacks in the Watts section of Los Angeles, some Eastern European minorities in urban industrial areas, one might wonder why 1000 a day continue to come. Communications have gone from relatives and friends describing hardships, but this is no deterrent. Compared to other situations it does not seem to matter. Foreigners seem conviced that their status as a minority is better in America than elsewhere. They can practice their own religion, their own customs, keep their own names, strive for a good education, have the hope of being accepted, be free of a class structure. Even if two out of one hundred make it up the ladder, that is two more than would have made it up elsewhere. I am open to the idea that there may be other minorities more deprived in the United States, such as the elderly, or the very poorest, but I find it hard to see that this is the case with ethnic minorities. Deprivation is easy to document because we advertise it. We research it and publish it. Graduate students go to "barrio" sections and write M.A. theses on conditions there, whereas other countries hide the situation. There is no academic openness or government admission about what it is really like to be a migrant Italian laborer in countries to the North of Italy, or what it is like to be a non-Moslem in Malaysia, or a Jew in the U.S.S.R., unless an outsider cares to report the actual situation. With openness often comes reform. Minorities searching for a new land know this, and their choice is America for this reason, despite the inequalities both we and they know exist.

NOTES

1. Geneva Gay, "Racism in America: Imperatives for Teaching Ethnic Studies", in James A. Banks, ed., *Teaching Ethnic Studies: Concepts and Strategies* (Washington, D.C.: National Council for Social Studies, 1973), p. 28.
2. Kwang-Ching Liu, *Americans and Chinese* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 23.